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ABSTRACT

Although counselors have implicitly understood and used a number of its tenets, an action-theoretical approach is a relatively recent development in career counseling. This digest analyzes the tenets of this approach. An action approach to career counseling sees clients as agents who steer and direct their activities. It represents an integration of constructionist, contextual, and narrative approaches. Action theory is based on the importance of ways in which people organize their daily lives. Action and career are viewed as two important and interrelated constructs. The theory provides a framework and language which can be useful in understanding career counseling. Its theoretical propositions explore ways of viewing action, the construction of career resulting from counselor/client discourse, a balancing of what must be done in the short term and what can be done in one's life, the belief that career is not solely a matter of individual action but involves the social and dynamic nature of careers, and the recognition that the term "career" may not be critical to clients. One of the values of an action-theoretical approach is its ability to link theory and practice, thus providing counselors a conceptual model that parallels human experience. (RJM)

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by Richard A. Young

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An Action Approach to Career Counseling

Richard A. Young

Overview

Although counselors have implicitly understood and used a number of its tenets for some time (Polkinghorne, 1990; Valach, 1990), an action-theoretical approach is a relatively recent development in career counseling. It is based on the premise that the subject of career counseling is the goal-directed and intentional action of the client. Action theory sees clients as agents who steer and direct their activities. As applied to career counseling, it represents an integration of constructionist, contextual, and narrative approaches that have recently received attention in counseling, psychology, and the social sciences.

Counselors frequently base their practice on how clients construct and resolve problems in their daily lives. Career and counseling theories and research have not always been able to remain close to this understanding of practice. In an effort to remedy this situation, action theory offers a conceptual framework and language for understanding career development and career counseling that is close to human experience.

The Action-Theory Approach

Much of career counseling has either been based on the measurement of client interests and personality or aimed at the remediation of socialization effects. Action theory's perspective is based on a constructionist epistemology which highlights the importance of the way we organize our knowledge in our daily lives. Essentially, constructionists suggest that people use a variety of concepts and frameworks to organize and explain their own and other people's behavior. Moreover, the meaning of people's experience is reflected in their construct system.

Action and career are two important and interrelated constructs in the lives of many people. People frequently think of themselves and other people as purposive, proactive, and self-organizing. For the most part, their behavior is goal-directed and intentional. Action refers to short-term behavior of this kind, but other constructs are needed for sequences of interrelated actions over the long term.

Career is one construct that many people use to understand goal-directed and intentional action over the long term. For example, completing an examination has meaning in the short-term; it provides a sense of closure, or perhaps accomplishment. When joined with other actions, it can also have long-term meaning, such as qualification for further study or job entry.

Action theory provides a conceptual framework and language useful to our understanding of career and career counseling. Some of the relevant propositions are

1. Action can be seen from three perspectives:
   - the manifest behavior of the actors
   - the conscious cognitions (thoughts and feelings) that accompany, steer, and direct the manifest behavior as it occurs
   - the social meaning in which the action is embed ded.

All three perspectives are critical to understanding action and career. Some theories approach career from one of the perspectives and emphasize behavior,cognition, or social meaning almost exclusively. The action-theoretical approach integrates all perspectives.

2. The construction of career occurs, at least in part, through social discourse between counselor and client. However, the action pertinent to career occurs both outside of and within counseling.

3. Most counselors recognize that career profoundly involves the emotions of their clients. For example, long-term plans and goals are intimately related to happiness. Moreover, career is concerned with practical action, that is, balancing between what *must* be done in the short term and what can be done in one's life. As clients take action regarding these expectations and possibilities, emotions are likely involved.

4. There is also joint action, which is a third kind of activity which lies between individual activity and external events (Shotter, 1980). This is in contrast to theories that place the locus of career within the person. Career is not solely a matter of individual action, but heretofore counseling has not had a language to describe persons acting together in the social and dynamic nature of career. Nevertheless, this is what counselors and clients do. As they engage in counseling, they actually construct action and career. By virtue of this and other joint ac-

tions, the client comes to construct the career she or he will have.

5. The term *career* itself may not be critical to clients. What is critical is to identify the constructs that clients use to represent long-term, goal-directed, intentional action. For example, *project* may be a construct that represents a sequence of goal-directed action which may be useful to clients.

Implications for Practice

One primary value of an action-theoretical approach to career counseling is its ability to link theory and practice. Counselors want a conceptual framework that is close to human experience. Among the specific practice implications are the following:

1. Interpretation is emphasized. Clients are seen as engaged in the process of making sense of their actions—they are interpreters. Intentionality and goal-directedness are two constructs they use to interpret their actions. Actions are also interpreted in light of long-term constructs, such as career. In addition, career involves the interpretation and reinterpretation of past and future (possible) actions in terms of present action. For example, a young woman interprets her decision to quit school as goal-directed: "I needed to get away from a boring and frustrating place." She may also have some understanding of the long-term implications of her action, such as, "Lots of people quit high school, I'll go to evening classes when I need to." Later in life she may reinterpret these actions in light of subsequent events.

2. Counselors recognize that interpretation occurs in social settings, that is, between clients, their peers, families, employers, or teachers. Thus, career counseling also addresses interpersonal relationships and their meaning for the client.

3. A self-confrontation method can be used to access the conscious cognitions that accompany career-related actions (Young, Valach, Dillabough, Dover, & Matthes (1994). This method helps clients see themselves in action, aids them as they process their cognitions, and enables them to receive feedback. It integrates cognition, emotion, and action in a conceptual and practical manner. It also uses everyday constructs related to the meaning and experience of clients.

Current Status

To date, work has largely focused on describing the features of action theory and how it can be applied to career theory and counseling (Polkinghorne, 1990; Valach, 1990; Young & Valach, in press), and research (Young et al., 1994). Young et al.'s method for studying the career conversations of parents and adolescents involved the action of the conversation, the conscious cognitions as the participants steer and direct the conversation, and the social meaning attributed to the conversation by the participants.

Conclusion

The above research extends previous studies on parental influence by identifying the individual and joint actions that parents and adolescents take in career decisions and how these actions contribute to the construction of career. The application of this approach to a wide range of career counseling practice has only begun (Young & Valach, 1994).

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